

Advancing DoD Travel Reengineering Goals

by Lieutenant Colonel Stephen C. Tye

I remember vividly the first time I caught a glimpse of travel reengineering. The occasion was the January 1995 Air Combat Command (ACC) Comptrollers Conference at Langley AFB, Virginia. Travel reengineering was a pipe dream. Yet, considering the Air Force was in the throes of downsizing, a concept that promised work reduction and process simplification captivated my interest. A great deal of change was about to take place in the name of travel reengineering.

This article condenses some of the key events associated with one chapter of travel reengineering, the chapter written by the travel reengineering teams at Langley AFB, Virginia and the 11th Wing, Bolling AFB, Washington D.C. In retrospect, the achievements of these teams are nothing short of amazing. It is most appropriate to recapture the highlights and duly recognize those involved.

Let's begin by putting things into perspective. In FY94 ACC had 228 personnel dedicated solely to performing travel work. As a group they processed over 510,000 annual travel documents. ACC was, in fact, processing this many documents even after fully implementing the Government Travel Card Program which had eliminated nearly 80,000 annual travel advances. Travel generated an enormous work load. It involved as many as 17 steps to prepare and pay travel authorizations. It was also complicated, cumbersome, and manual.

When ACC learned the 11th Wing and the Pentagon were experimenting with a prototype automated travel system, it asked to participate. ACC's rationale was to ensure the result could be implemented Air Force-wide. The 11th Wing, which had already gained notoriety for receiving Vice President Gore's Golden Hammer Award for the initial concept, eagerly welcomed the company. They were already working to merge existing government travel software with a commercial off-the-shelf software package. Their goal was to create an automated program that could handle the full spectrum of DoD travel and link travel accounting data to the general Air Force accounting system. This automated program, combined with a General Accounting Office sanctioned electronic signature, became the basis for the Federal Automated System for Travel, or FAST.

The timing of this joint venture was fortuitous for both. The larger DoD travel reengineering effort was just getting underway, and both the 11th Wing and Langley AFB were perfect selections as travel re-invention laboratories. The 11th Wing's customer base represented over 12,000 potential travelers. Langley, with its operational wing and a headquarters, had over 10,000. Both sites posed a challenging test for this new travel system, and by the spring of 1995, FAST was on the launch pad and ready to take flight.

Just as Thomas Edison did not create the perfect light bulb on the first attempt, FAST did not get off the ground without some regression. Despite promising pretests, major problems materialized once implementation began. Of these problems, the one causing greatest

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concern was Local Area Network (LAN) server capacity. FAST, which operates in a LAN environment similar to electronic mail, absorbs a considerable amount of memory capacity. As more users came on line, existing servers quickly reached their maximum capacity, making FAST, well, not too fast. The simple solution was to procure new servers large enough to enable FAST to compete with other LAN programs.

Another major issue related to training. It was obvious from the beginning that a comprehensive training program was necessary to teach travelers how to use FAST. This, too, was a significant effort that took a great deal of time to develop and maintain. As every new organization was brought on line in the technical sense, time had to be carved out for mass briefings and individual hands-on system training. Feedback became a source for concern as new users began supplying complaints of system unfriendliness. As a DOS-based system, FAST could be somewhat difficult to use, particularly for initial users. The solution was to establish a customer help-desk or hot line to provide immediate tutorial information as needed. Eventually this idea expanded to include on-line access to frequently asked questions, or FAQs, and a published Users Manual.

Even with help-desks and hot-lines, nothing took the place of good old fashioned salesmanship. People typically resist change anyway, and the thought of something as radical as a paperless travel system with electronic signatures caused considerable resentment. Travelers could no longer see and touch the travel process. This major paradigm shift required a real leap of faith. In light of these issues, FAST needed a strong marketing effort to extol its virtues and advantages.

Lack of technical skills raised yet another issue. When the Langley implementation effort began, very little formal technical training existed among the FAST team members. Even without this technical capability, team members made a great deal of progress with nothing more than genuine G.I. initiative. However, many organizations had independently developed LAN structures that required upgrading to be compatible with FAST software. Similarly, pre-implementation planning entailed in-depth LAN assessments to help understand the communication structural needs of each organization. Although base communication experts availed themselves to this effort, the need to have an organic technical base became obvious. Langley's solution was to enroll two NCOs in network school to earn their accreditation as Certified Network Engineers. Once these skills were acquired, FAST technicians made most of the necessary LAN enhancements themselves saving a great deal of time. So, after procuring larger servers, establishing a solid training program, initiating a strong publicity effort, and acquiring networking skills, FAST got on the fast track.

Within a short time lessons-learned folders began to bulge with information. Meetings between the 11th Wing and Langley were regular occurrences, in addition to daily interface. As the implementation effort progressed, a phenomenal cooperative effort developed. Team work solved a never-ending list of problems and kept FAST up and running practically day and night. As a bonus, numerous software improvements and program enhancements were produced—significant achievements in their own right.

By late 1996, as FAST implementation at ACC headquarters and the Pentagon neared completion, both teams prepared for their next challenges. The 11th Wing completed the Pentagon and set their sights

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on base-level units at Bolling AFB. Likewise, Langley looked to the 1st Fighter Wing, but also focused efforts on developing the first FAST exportation plan.

The Langley vision for FAST had always included, at a minimum, all of ACC. For exportation to work efficiently, new premises were in order. An exportation plan was needed for starters to describe FAST implementation in detail. Langley wanted an off-the-shelf type of plan capable of guiding the actions of an implementing base. This plan had to be a complete recipe for success, so to speak. Secondly, the implementing base must be able to perform the implementation with local resources. ACC headquarters would provide the engineering and technical support, but an implementing base needed to perform the actual hands-on implementation and training.

Late 1996 to early 1997 was a particularly challenging period as these new concepts began to take form, and as the headquarters FAST team began to take on a new look. Within a four-month period, three NCOs left active duty creating a critical void in FAST engineering and technical support skills. Fortunately, advance planning compensated for these losses. Temporary overhires to perform the bulk of administrative work, and contractors to handle the technical workload would now form the nucleus of the Langley FAST team. This transition took place gradually allowing support for the existing FAST network to continue without problems and implementation to remain on track.

As the Langley effort now focused on the 1st Wing implementation, a decision was made to transfer the bulk of the implementation responsibilities into the hands of the 1st Fighter Wing itself. More specifically, the 1st Comptroller Squadron (CPTS) assumed a leadership role. Several 1 CPTS folks had been key members of the Langley team from the start, and were well versed in the implementation effort. However, up until this time, they had only performed in a support role. Now they were about to call the shots “on their turf” while deferring to their headquarters counterparts for technical assistance.

The implementation effort at the 1st Wing, similar to the headquarters implementation, was also ambitious and challenging. Competing wing priorities such as deployments and exercises caused several scheduling delays, but progress remained steady. One of the biggest issues facing the 1st Wing, though, was how far to extend the implementation process into the bowels of the 1st Wing organizations. Headquarters personnel typically travel more frequently than their base-level counterparts, so virtually everyone at command level received user training. In contrast, operational wing personnel typically travel less considering their mission, that is, wrench turners in Maintenance, stock clerks in Supply, cooks in Services, etc. Many wing personnel were infrequent travelers so it was of great concern as to how FAST would work for them. The 1st Wing decided to adjust the implementation approach accordingly. Training was limited to travelers most likely to travel, but also capable of expanding later to include new users as the need became apparent. Likewise, the 1st Wing established unit trainers in a train-the-trainer fashion to allow units to add new users later as desired. These approaches worked well and 1st Wing implementation moved steadily and reached the final stage in the summer of 1997.

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Finally, after three years, the FAST test under DoD travel reengineering has been declared a complete success. With 10,000 users and 75,000 electronic documents processed by Langley as of this writing, the pipe dream has become reality. Its success is catching on with other MAJCOMs, too. Most recently, HQ AETC followed ACCs lead by initiating FAST implementation at Randolph AFB, Texas. The FAST test also continues at ACC. This past summer ACC plotted its next course to Mountain Home AFB, Idaho. When SAF/FM assumed the lead for Air Force Travel Reengineering efforts, it tasked ACC to see how well and how quickly FAST could be exported. These test results will contribute towards further developments under the DoD Defense Travel System (DTS) concept. Most particularly, the results will be of value to the Defense Travel Region (DTR) 6 initiative. DTR 6, a compilation of DoD sites within an 11-state section of the middle United States, will be the first such region to test and implement a contract-operated automated travel system under DTS. Exportation will be a major issue for DTS and FAST is already paving the way by meeting these issues head-on now.

In conclusion, the FAST story is one of victory and celebration, not only for the dedicated people at Langley and the 11th Wing, but also for the larger DoD effort. FAST is an unparalleled success and its greatest contribution is proving that electronic, paperless travel works, and works very well. While future travel reengineering efforts may shift to other software designs, FAST clearly earns a notable spot in financial management history as a true pioneer in the DoD travel reengineering effort.

As a final comment, the financial management community should express a debt of gratitude to those most responsible for getting FAST off the ground. These folks set the stage for what now has become the most successful travel reengineering system in the DoD today. Members of the original FAST implementation team include:

Mr George Cava, 11WG/FM

Ms Denise Schisel, 11 WG/FMI

Mr Larry Hedrick, 11 WG/FMI

Capt Rod Berk, 11 WG/FMI

Mr Dewey Cole, 11 WG/FMI

Col Robert Adams, HQ ACC/FMF

Lt Col Charles Thomas, HQ ACC/FMFO

SMSgt Robert Sullivan, HQ ACC/FMFOP

SSgt Karlowe Kroon, HQ ACC/FMFOP

SSgt Troy Young, HQ ACC/FMFOP

SSgt Juliana Gibson, 1 CPTS/FMFT

SrA Timothy Rogers, 1 CPTS/FMFT

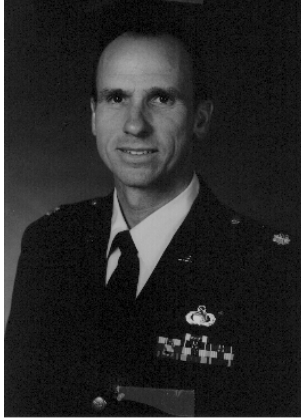
SrA Terry Welch, 1 CPTS/FMFT

SrA Sean Freeman, 1 CPTS/FMFT

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About the Authors

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